

The Benefits of a Thankful Heart

Thanksgiving is more than a national holiday, more than a day to celebrate a covered dish dinner between Indians and pilgrims. It is more than a day to devour turkeys, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie, and to watch football. It is more than a day to visit and celebrate family. Thanksgiving is a command. It is a spiritual discipline. It is a state of heart, mind, and spirit. Thanksgiving is an expression of faith, an act of worship. Thanksgiving is the reset button for the human soul. I'll talk more about this last one in a bit. Thanksgiving and giving thanks is one of the most important things we ever do.

At the beginning of our Scripture passage from Luke 17, Luke says in verse 1, "Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee." This bit of geography is important because of the relationship that existed between the Jews who lived in Galilee and the Samaritans who lived in Samaria. Basically they hated each other. The Jews looked down on the Samaritans as half-breeds and inferior human beings. The Samaritans had trouble trusting the Jews.

As the passage unfolds, verses 12 and 13 tell us: "As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us!' Although we already know that Jesus is on the border between Galilee and Samaria, the particular village remains unnamed and the 10 men who made themselves heard by Jesus also remain unnamed.

Luke the physician tells us that these 10 men are "lepers," and while leprosy in the Bible can refer to a great number of different skin diseases, I feel sure that the leprosy meant here was the bad kind. This was that terrible disfiguring disease in which one loses his sense of feeling and injuries go unnoticed. The skin turns white; one's flesh gradually rots away until secondary infections bring death. Leprosy was feared, and lepers faced the added pain of being separated from normal society. They were forced to turn to one another for human companionship and compassion. Religious Jews, in particular, gave lepers and wide berth because any contact with lepers or with anything that touched a leper made one ritually unclean and unable to worship or to have intimate fellowship with others until a period of cleansing was observed and appropriate sacrifices were made.

I say that this leprosy was the bad kind because of the urgency with which these 10 men cried out to Jesus: Luke tells us that "It was with a loud voice that they called out to Jesus and sought his pity." It is also interesting to note that so long as they were still lepers there is no distinction made between the diseased men. In their leprous state any distinction between Jew and Samaritan, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, good or bad, had become meaningless. Their common misery trumped any ethnic, religious, moral, or social distinction that might have otherwise been made. These 10 men were lepers and that was all anyone else saw. It was all that mattered.

Common suffering can serve to level out society and lead to friendships where they would not otherwise exist. Jews and Samaritans hated each other but not so much in leper colonies. It was with one voice that the 10 lepers cried out to Jesus for mercy. They kept their distance as a unit as the law required and they cried out as with one voice for mercy.

Another thing we are apt to miss in this story is that spiritually speaking all of us should be able to relate to the lepers' plight. The apostle Paul says, "**All** have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Isaiah 64:6 says, "**All** of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags . . ." **All** of the distinctions we make between ourselves and others in society are artificial and insignificant in the sight of God. A sinner is a sinner is a sinner. **All** of us are sinners. In Luke's portrayal of the 10 lepers every leper was just as vile and unclean as the next one. Each one was in desperate straights and in desperate need of the rescue that only Jesus could provide.

The next thing we see in Luke's story is that Jesus responds to the leper's request for healing with a simple request of His own. Luke 17:14 says, "When he saw them, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were cleansed." What we ought to notice here is that the 10 lepers were all treated the same way. They were all given the same assignment: "Go, show yourselves to the priests." They were all obedient to Jesus' commission and they all received the same healing; "as they went, they were cleansed." Hallelujah! Acts 2:21 says, "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

But then Luke's story takes an interesting twist. One guy breaks rank with the others. When he sees and feels that he has been healed, he turns around and comes back to Jesus to give thanks. Verses 15 and 16 say, "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him--and he was a Samaritan."

At this point Jesus is pleased and outraged all at the same time. Luke 17:17-18 say, "Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'" Jesus was happy about the one who came back to say thanks; He was angry that the other 9 didn't bother. He especially minded because the other 9 were Jews and should have known enough to give thanks, but they were found to be ungrateful. In the final verse of this story (v. 19), Luke tells us "Then he (Jesus) said to him (the Samaritan leper), 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well.'" This leads us to ask what about the other 9? Did their healing stick or did they become lepers again? Or were they now lepers of another sort--spiritual lepers who lacked the will to give thanks.

We have to ask the question, "why didn't the 9 return to give thanks?" There are several possibilities, none of which is a legitimate excuse. One probable possibility is that the Jewish men they felt a sense of entitlement. "Because we are among God's chosen people we deserve to be healed, or because we have been healed, we must deserve to be healed." The motivation to give thanks is taken away because they felt a sense of entitlement. "Let the dirty Samaritan give thanks--we don't need to." Or, it may have been a matter of a legalistic interpretation of Jesus' command. Jesus said, "Go show yourselves to the priest." He didn't say, "Come back and give thanks." "Isn't obedience more important than worship or the best form of worship?" Actually, this may be a very real possibility because the Jews of Jesus' day were taught to enforce the law in legalistic fashion. The chief priests, Pharisees, and teachers of the law taught them to deal with the law in this way. Maybe they didn't return to give thanks because they were not told to give thanks. A third possibility that a lot of wives may agree with is that 9 out of 10 men just lack any sense of courtesy. They ascribe to the philosophy: "take what you can get and run and don't ask any questions." "Don't go back to Jesus lest He change His mind about his gift of healing."

The bottom line here is that we don't know or can't know for certain why 9 did not express thanks. And maybe this is intentional on the part of Jesus and Luke. They want to leave the door open for us, so that whatever reason we have for not giving thanks can be included here. Whatever reason we give won't fly. **That dog won't hunt.**

Another thing we may gain from this story is an explanation of why the Jews in Jesus' day were not rescued from the horrible things that were happening to them. Their nation had been conquered, and they were subject to the laws and taxes of Rome. Their cherished Temple was about to be destroyed and their holy city was about to be burned. The Jews had become like lepers to the rest of the world and God didn't seem to be lifting a finger to help them. Why would God allow them to suffer such humiliation and ruin?

The silence of the 9 Jewish lepers who were healed makes it clear. God's people had not yet learned their lesson. Should He set them free from their sufferings they would simply go back to their arrogance, old prejudices, and idols. They would not return with grateful hearts to worship their deliverer. And in fact they didn't. Jesus suffered and shed His precious blood for their deliverance on Golgotha's hill, but most of the Jewish people didn't get it. They rejected their own Messiah, "He came to His own and His own received Him not," says John the apostle. And so, His salvation passed on to people who would appreciate it; it passed on to the Gentiles and even to the Samaritans.

Now, the question is, what does all of this have to do with us? Several things, I think. #1, it is a warning against that kind of pride known as hubris. In other words, we may take the position that "We are Christian Americans and we don't deserve the troubles we are going through right now." This week of Thanksgiving is a time to humble ourselves and reflect on that premise. If we have become like lepers on the world scene, maybe there is a reason for that. If God should allow our economy to collapse, maybe there is a reason for that. Maybe the fact that so many of us have turned our backs on God, and that so many of our law makers support gay marriage and make a mockery of legitimate marriage, and do nothing to protect the lives of the unborn; Maybe that has something to do with it. This thanksgiving is a time to humble ourselves and to confess our twin sins of apathy and silence, and to pray for forgiveness and for a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit. **It is time to humble ourselves and pray.**

#2, the story of the cleansing of the 10 lepers is a story about worship and passion. We notice that in this story all 10 lepers cried out in a loud voice for the Lord's pity; they weren't silent when they needed help. But what I think is neat here is that the Samaritan leper showed equal if not greater enthusiasm when he returned to give thanks. Verses 15 and 16 say again: "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him . . ." His devotion to Jesus was not some stern legalism but a full investment of mind, will, and emotion. The phrase that helps us gauge the depth of this man's gratitude is the part where it says, "He threw himself at Jesus' feet." True thanksgiving will always include a humbling of our hearts and a desire to serve the One who has blessed us. Lord you have blessed us; how can we honor and bless you in return. **A thankful heart expresses itself 'in worship and in service.**

#3, I said at the outset, "Thanksgiving is the reset button for the human soul." Those of you who know something about computers will appreciate this and the rest of you will just have to take my word for it, but computers get bogged down just like people. When you have been working on the computer for a long while opening and closing many different windows and programs, you will begin to notice that that your computer will slow down or begin to do strange things. It may even freeze up altogether. In most cases, the cure is simple. It's time to hit the old "reset" button. Turn the thing off and boot it back up again. Give it a chance to regroup and to make a new beginning. **It is time to reboot, time to give thanks.**

Stopping to consider our blessings and to track the source of those blessings back to God does the same sort of thing for us. It puts God back on the throne of our lives where He belongs, calms our fears, reorganizes our minds, and allows us too to make a new beginning.

This week of Thanksgiving is an opportunity for us to humble ourselves and pray for ourselves and for our nation. It is an opportunity to give ourselves to worship and to service. It is a time to let God be God and to make a new beginning.

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The Benefits of a Thankful Heart Luke 17:11-19

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